NENTE DOS DIREITOS DOS POVOS - LISBOA/JUNHO81

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The witness of Bruno Pistocchi, missionary in Timor for three years.

I was sent to East Timor to teach. This was the mentality of the Salesian superiors, who sent me. The long tradition of the Catholic Missions was to teach the Gospel and in Portuguese: for this reason I spent eight months in Lisbon before setting out for Timor.

Not one of those in charge of preparing me before my departure was in the slightest way interested to know whether I was studying the language of the people of Timor, or whether I had even a vague notion of the culture and way of life I was to find there. It was sufficient that I should speak Portuguese well, and that I should be ready to teach that the white presence guaranteed civilization, culture, progress and therefore faith.

For a year I was priest and missionary according to the desires of my superiors. I was active, I rushed around from one village to the other by jeep, motorcycle, or on horseback, depending on the seasons and the state of the roads. I was able to say two or three masses every Sunday in villages even sixty kilometers apart. I built playing fields, I presided over the construction of schools, chapels, missionary cultivations, and so forth.

Then I gradually came to realize that it was all mistaken: they, the people of Timor, needed neither my efficiency nor my flying masses, nor my races in the jeep covering with dust the long lines of people going to the Sunday bazaar, laden with sacks of sweet potatoes and mandioca.

When I was in a village and, looking at my watch, said that I had to go because there were things I had to do, the people would be amazed at my hurry, at my altogether Western anxiety about time going by, and they could not feel that at that particular moment the things to be done elsewhere were more important than to stay with them. "Hela ho ami, halimar uit oan", they would ask. Stay with us, let's stay a little longer together. You can wait to put the buffalo or the horse to graze, to work in the fields, to build your house, it's more important to stay with men, to communicate with people.

Then I would ask myself what I had gone there to teach. I became aware of the fact that the people of Timor were living with values which were truer than mine. And I started to listen, to observe their lives attentively.

I remembered Charles de Foucauld, the only white man whom the Arabs have called brother, since the time of the Crusades - the missionary who for thirty years lived among the Tuaregs without baptizing anyone, but studying their language and learning to love their culture.

When I went on missionary visits from one village to another, the Timor catechist, who accompanied me would note down the sermons I preached, the confessions and the communions I distributed, and to count them he used a machine the size of a chronometer, which when a button was pushed, would record the progressive numbers. This collection of data would then be sent to Dili, and from there to Lisbon and to Rome. In Rome there would be the triumphal picture of the advance of the Faith among the infidels. This would be laughable if it were not tragic.

I had been sent to preach to the Makassae tribe, about 78,000 people, scattered through the region surrounding the mountainous massif of Mate Biana. The Makassae tribe is now at the centre of the storm and is the heart of the resistance to the Indonesian invasion.

After 400 years of white presence in Timor nothing has been written in the Makassae language. The first rudimental Makassae grammar, which has up to now only been duplicated, is the one I made with a group of tribal youths. This is the result of colonialism. I read in the review FUNU that at Kelicai, one of the Makassae centres to which I am most attached, where I wrote the grammar and collected the most beautiful Makassae poems, 50 people have died in 15 days. It does not take long to destroy a people consisting of 78,000 inhabitants, and the civilization and culture of this people will disappear along with them. A scrap of humanity which will never be repeated gone for ever. We know almost everything about Athens, its history has come down to us, it is told by the Parthenon, but what will we know of Kelicai, of Baghia, of Baucau, of Uatulari and Ossù? No trace will remain of the philosophy, the faith, the soul of an entire people, because this was entrusted to dance, to poetry, to oral tales, to the "rata lolo" (chanted story) of the old people, witnesses of their heritage. The people of Timor never dreamt of old people's homes: the old are the encyclopedia of the village, the educators of the children, the history and geography books, in a word the continuity with the past and the first step towards the future.

Since the white people arrived, 400 years ago, the creativity of the people of Timor has been frustrated. The people continued to hand down from father to son, all that had been made over the centuries, chanting their poetry and dancing their rhythms, but they did not create anything new, they were waiting for better days. A Makassae poem says:

Gheri gheri bini ene tu aaria
mu'a nokorau gau rau ula aaria.

Earlier, earlier there were a few orphans
Now that our land has been conquered we are all orphans.

The people of Timor had never confided such poems to a white man, because they are authentic political accusations, which the Pide was watching out for, however they escaped the Portuguese because of their crass ignorance of local culture. This is what colonialism has been for the Makassae: they do not accuse the Portuguese for having exploited, oppressed and violated them, they accuse the white man, and now the Javanese, for having attempted with arms to make them all orphans, uprooting them from their culture, from their ancestors, to have induced them to be ashamed of their origins, to have led them to accepted alien ways of life and linguistic patterns. The exams that a secondary school-child in Kelicai has to take are the same as those in Lisbon, they study Portuguese and European history and geography: swallows and the spring, without any allusion to his seasonal rhythms marked by the monsoons, where there is no spring and there are no swallows.

I know a white missionary who not so long ago organized bands of young Catholics to go into the houses and forcefully collect the luliks and the sacred objects kept there, in order to burn them in the centre of the village.

I have known missionaries who not only had never participated in the animist cerimonies of those they intended to convert, but, on the contrary, openly despised them as being barbaric and diabolic. No effort had been made in 400 years to understand, to appraise, to graft the truth which they claimed to be bringing into what was already there.

I heard a young Timor priest who had studied theology in Lisbon say to me, when I asked him why he did not go to visit his parents in his village rather than have them come to Dili, "I am ashamed of returning to the village, they haven't got a lavatory in the house, the hut is dirty, I have my dignity to defend". Heavens above! Why in God's name had an intelligent child been brought to be ashamed of his father and mother? Why, in order to teach him the fourth commandment, "Honour your father and your mother", had the opposite horror been reached, of despising his own people, who have beliefs and rhythms of life that are different from those of the television and refrigerator, of petrol and the atomic bomb? Even the best people, even some of those who in 1974 were to become the leaders of the various political parties, and then revolutionaries and guerrilla fighters in the resistance against the invasion, have suffered this cultural up-rooting. Up to April 25,1974,

some of them were in important positions in the various sectors of the colonial administration and were very far from the ideas they hold today. They were numbed by the fleeting wellbeing they had been shown. Fortunately they have woken up. But they are paying for having done so too late. Before April 25th I was transferred from Baucau, the second largest town in Timor, at the extreme eastern end of the island: a Timor friend of mine, who later became one of the leaders of FRETILIN, reported me to the Portuguese administrator because I had made some notes on the unjust taxation system imposed on the people.

I read in the second issue of FUNU that that man, who was a Minister in the first FRETILIN government, has betrayed again, this time his people and his party, favouring the intensification of the Indonesian invasion campaign.

After having understood all this I lived among the people without working for, bringing about or believing in the validity of a mission which had a lorry, three tractors, two motorcycles, two jeeps, 600 head of cattle, 700 sheep, 70 pigs, about 20 horses and 19 tons of maize, whereas outside this oasis, where we were eating spaghetti and drinking Portuguese wine, the people in the huts around were dying of hunger because in that year, 1973, the maize cultivations had been voraciously attacked by rats.

That was the time when with the help of about 20 young men I built a hut, a Timor hut, where I could live as they do and eat maize when there was any. We lived together for about a year, and after the revolution of the carnations in 1974 my young men divided themselves among the three parties which were starting up in Timor: the ASDT (subsequently FRETILIN), the UDT and APODETI.

As in their case, so also in Dili and in the rest of the island, the people at the beginning decided on a party not on the basis of ideologies or political convictions, which had never been discussed under the colonial administration, but because of tribal or clan affiliations. Marxism, Liberalism, Capitalism, Democracy couldn't have a clear meaning for them. But if the head of a tribe had, because of sympathy or convenience, decided to join FRETILIN, then the only thing left for his rival, the leader of the traditionally enemy tribe, was to join UDT or APODETI, and all his subjects with him. Anyone who had relations or interests in Indonesian Timor would choose APODETI.

Inevitably the three parties set up after April 25th became affiliated to different and opposing blocks in the international sphere, which further unsettled the traditional life and culture of the country.
This has led to the present situation, where in order to throw out the foreigners the people of Timor have had to ask help from other foreigners, among others those who for 400 years neither understood nor helped them. The people of Timor did not ask us for ideas, it seems to me that they only wanted and now only want the freedom to be able to decide on their own what their future, their way of life and their beliefs should be.
They never wanted and they do not want to die twice, and above all they do not want to die in silence.